

Carnappers

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Summary: Tailgate must save Tracks from a band of otherworldly car thieves.

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Rodeo Drive had become the Bermuda Triangle of L.A.

Tailgate, disguised as a white Camaro, plotted along the famous shopping district. Although a few Hollywood stars could be spotted, Tailgate was focused on their cars.

"Sell-outs," he chastised. "You flaunt slavery just to be in their presence." Tailgate didn't understand that the average car was not alive like he was. To him, any machine (be it car or can opener) owned by people should consider itself oppressed. Tailgate's colleagues considered him a sadly amusing portrait of misguided nobility.

He was there at his leader, Optimus Prime's, behest. It seemed that their comrade Tracks had vanished while investigating a news-making string of expensive car thefts. Optimus suspected that their enemies, the Decepticons, might be involved, especially due to the speed and number in which the cars were stolen.

There was an odd twist to the crimes; nobody had yet seen an actual theft. Tracks might have, but that was academic. No-one really missed the egotistical Tracks, but he was a fellow Autobot. Some brazenly suggested that Tracks had run off again on adventures with his human pal Raul, but Optimus was more concerned.

Though daylight, Tailgate noticed an unusually bright light emanating from the side parking lot of a beauty salon. "Hmm, what might that be? A movie being filmed?" Tailgate rounded the salon and screeched

to a halt in the parking lot.

The kidnappers! Had they been human thieves, the rescue mission would have been much simpler. Tailgate would have followed them to their grimy lair and most likely would have found a stripped-down Tracks. As it was, these carnappers forced Tailgate to dismiss any ordinary plans.

A gang of portly robots poured from a portal that opened in the parking lot's center. Through the glowing gateway, Tailgate saw a large stockroom. The thieves were taller than the pricey automobiles and had little trouble carrying a car each on their backs. Like a line of ants, they scooped up cars and filed quickly back into the trans-dimensional gateway.

None of that phased Tailgate. He was instead perturbed by their familiar appearance. Each drone had a pugnacious mug, a fat body supported by squat legs and a spiked ball and chain draped from a hip. Because of whom they served, they were a thing worse than Decepticons.

"Sharkticons," Tailgate muttered. Some were in robot mode and a few remained in land-shark form. What were the dense servants doing on Earth? Their multi-faced masters, the Quintessons, had caused the Autobots much trouble and grief in past years. But why would villains of intergalactic proportions stoop to car theft?

Tailgate rolled closer, careful not to stray into any Sharkticon's line of vision. Still, one little gremlin noticed the motion and made to snatch him. Tailgate backed up, hoping to spook the creature. The Sharkticon smiled at his new acquisition, baring chipped teeth, and kept on coming.

"No?" asked the annoyed Autobot. "Alright then." Tailgate shot forward and nipped the creature's stomach. The Sharkticon fell onto its bottom, whimpered more out of surprise than pain, and scampered off for the portal.

Suddenly, a different style of trooper, this one faintly alligator in design, stepped out of the portal. It waved an arm in a commanding gesture, causing the Sharkticons to lift their last cars and march back towards the gateway.

Not wanting to abandon the helpless autos and possibly Tracks, Tailgate followed the last Sharkticon into the portal. The gateway shut with an electric hiss and Tailgate surveyed the storeroom.

Cars of all fancy styles were jammed together like cattle, some victims progressing slowly along a conveyor belt. Sharkticons stood along the disassembly line, ripping each auto to shreds. Tailgate gasped.

Floating down the aisle was a tentacled observer: one of the hideous Quintessons. He swept by the workers, barking orders to whomever was in sight. "Rip that metal faster! You! Stand still in that booth! I can't afford an inaccurate scan. We need a much bigger army before we invade."

The metal was tossed into heaps and collected by more Sharkticons,

who deposited it into a rectangular machine. On the device's opposite end, one Sharkticon stood still in a booth.

A computer belched, "Scanning Series 5." The Sharkticon in the booth was enclosed by a light grid and the machine began to churn and clunk like a protesting washing machine. Tailgate heard metal grinding and the clink of hammers. Then, from the curtained end of the conveyer, stepped a Sharkticon identical to the one in the booth.

Tailgate felt as though he might regurgitate oil. What manner of conscious could allow one to mutilate beautiful cars and recycle their bodies as mindless Sharkticons? He was ready to leap into the aisle, deck the Quintesson and emancipate the remaining cars. Duty, however, forced him to be a bit more tactful. Tracks had to be located. Tailgate pondered for a moment his dilemma. Was one life worth that of the cars who would perish in his hesitation? Tailgate had often wondered how sentient the average piece of machinery was in comparison to a Transformer. A Pinto had never held a conversation with him. Rare was it that a battalion of toasters would take up arms and help him defend Earth against Decepticon invaders. Still, he couldn't pass up the notion that they were just quiet and independent.

Recently, though, Tailgate's beliefs had begun to persist that machines were to him as wildlife was to humans. They did not possess the same level of consciousness, but the greater beings still had the responsibility of protecting them. It was a sad truth, though, that the life of a more sentient comrade came before that of a lesser being.

The Quintesson passed a stack of cars awaiting their fate and Tailgate noticed an anomaly in the pile. One car had a white wing protruding from under the rear wheel-well. And Tracks was likely the only Corvette present that could fly at subsonic speeds!

Time to pounce. Between Tailgate and his buried comrade, there was only one walkway and a few expensive cars. He waited until the nearest Sharkticon had wandered away and putted out into the aisle. What Tailgate had failed to notice was another of the critters sneaking a nap behind the next car. The sound of his engine awoke the creature, which wearily padded forth and into Tailgate's bumper. The Sharkticon turned its bugged eyes towards him and both robots froze.

Tailgate noticed the critter's broken teeth, cracked in the same places as the Sharkticon that had tried to grab him in the parking lot. Recognizing the fearsome white Camaro, the Sharkticon darted away. Tailgate sighed and transformed to robot mode as he reached the conveyor. He knelt down to the car pile's bottom and poked Tracks.

The trapped Autobot groaned after Tailgate rattled his wing enough.

"Tracks," whispered Tailgate, "how you doing?"

"Tailgate," Tracks sputtered. "What am I...Oh geez! Those Sharkticorns knocked my senses into a tizzy."

Tailgate peered over his shoulder to see that no-one was approaching

and laid down flat. "How did this happen?"

Tracks thought for a bit, dredging the memories from his electronic brain. "I found that the Sharks were absconding with some pricey autos and flew at one."

"Flew at one? Good plan, Tracks."

Tracks paused, but couldn't determine if Tailgate was sarcastic or serious. "So," he continued, "I soared at one, graceful as a bird, when the lugnut blocked me with his tail and blasted me with his gun. Can't recall much more. Blast though, I can't transform with all this weight on me. What am I doing under this pile of cars?"

"It appears," explained Tailgate, "that they're going to strip your metal and make more Sharkticons from it."

"Dear Lord!" Tracks wheezed. "Get this garbage off of me!"

Tailgate's eyes slimmed. "Garbage?"

"Tailgate, please?" Tracks pleaded. He shifted as panic overcame him. Tailgate forgot the barb and strained to push a Ferrari off of the pile.

"They're planning an invasion of Earth," Tailgate grunted as he shoved the car with his back. His legs almost buckled as the car fell onto its side. He apologized to the Ferrari and began to pull an Aston Martin down from Track's hood. "These cars are also destined to become Sharkticons. We have to save them." Behind them, the conveyor belt and machinery chugged on.

"Save them?" Tracks laughed. "We best get out alive and alert Optimus of the plan. As nice as these cars are, you should be more worried about the invasion." Tracks knew of Tailgate's odd notions about machine life and decided then was not the time to reveal to Tailgate that he was insane.

"Good point," Tailgate murmured. "We'll come back to rescue them, once we've defeated the Quintesson attack." He gently pushed aside a Lincoln, uncovering Tracks. "But I'm not leaving until they are out of danger. We have to take out the Sharkticon replicators."

Tracks awkwardly transformed. He knew Tailgate's plan had merit, if for the wrong reason. "It would be prudent to stop Sharkticon production, at least, and...Hey!" After a quick spot inspection, Tracks had realized a horrifying development. "I'm covered in dents! Those brutes have no idea how to handle a fine car."

Tailgate shrugged. "Why worry? If you tailor your looks to impress humans, they'll only wish to possess you."

"So?" spat Tracks, waving his arms, "I want to be wanted!"

Tailgate shook his head and muttered. "Prostitute."

"What was that?"

Tailgate stood up and glanced around. "Uh oh." Sharkticons, probably

alerted by the falling cars, were gathering around their position. Their grapefruit eyes feasted on the intruders.

Tracks, still irate, hopped up and realized quickly that they were in a problematic situation.

"What is it?" barked the Quintesson to the Sharkticon with the chipped teeth that was leading him to the Autobots. When they got there, the Sharkticon cautiously snuck behind the Quintesson.

"Eh?" said the Quintesson as his eyes expanded upon seeing Tracks and Tailgate. "Transformers?!"

"Hey there," greeted Tracks, rather weakly.

The Quintesson's head swiveled to a different face and he raised a tentacle at the Autobots. "Execute!"

The Sharkticons converted to their land-shark modes and scrambled over the piles of cars, jaws snapping.

"Come on!" yelled Tracks as he snatched Tailgate's arm and hurled over the conveyor belt. The two Autobots dashed along the conveyor's length and took cover behind the Sharkticon-scanner. Thankfully, the creature being scanned was kept motionless during the process.

Tracks pulled out a pistol and peered out from behind the booth. He fired randomly at the approaching horde, hoping to avoid any nasty bites. "Where's the exit?" he panted.

Tailgate poked his torso out from the other side and fired with his pistol. "It's some kind of portal that leads off this...place and into Los Angeles."

"Where is it?" emphasized Tracks.

"Behind the Sharkticons," Tailgate announced. "But we're not leaving until we injure the replicating machine." The sharks broke through their fire and were flowing over the machinery to surround them.

"Alright, alright, I'll take it out with my missiles," assured Tracks. "First though, let's cloud our whereabouts." He swung out his black beam gun and released a volley of dark gas. Unable to see, the Sharkticons ran about, clanging into each other.

"Cursed Autobots," yelled the Quintesson as the chipped-tooth Sharkticon clung to one of his tentacles. "Find them! Just grab around."

"Now, we have some seconds to work with," Tracks advised Tailgate. He transformed into his jet-car mode. "Hop on! We'll take the high road! And lay clear of my roof cannons."

Tailgate complied, holding for dear life to Track's canopy. He almost slid clean off. "I wish you weren't so aerodynamic. I can't find a good hand-hold!"

Tracks lifted off the ground, rising above the gas cloud. He tilted

forward, preparing to fire upon the scanning booth, when they suddenly had another passenger.

A Sharkticon leapt out of the mist and onto Track's rear bumper. "Hey!" Tracks scolded. The terrified critter swung up and ran forward, jolting Tailgate free. Tracks wavered as the Sharkticon hopped to the side and Tailgate rolled off of his hood like a bowling ball.

Tailgate grunted as he hit the ground and backpedaled through the scanning booth, knocking the still Sharkticon out of the way.

The computer belched, "Unknown model. Scanning," and surrounded the confused Autobot with its light grid.

Tracks nosed downwards and transformed, pausing to confuse the Sharkticons with more blasts from his beam gun. "Tailgate," he hissed, "Get up!" He was jostled as a frantic Sharkticon ran into his leg.

Tailgate stood up groggily and stepped out of the booth. "Tracks, I think I was just scanned into their computer."

The light grid shut off as Tailgate exited and the computer announced, "New form being created." The machine began vigorously crunching metal.

The black gas began to clear and the Sharkticons regained their bearings.

"Come on," whispered Tracks as he backed up, Tailgate following. The Sharkticons hurried after them and Tracks fired his beam gun.

Tailgate, however, paused when he saw the curtained end of the conveyor belt. "Well, I'll be..."

"Be what?" snapped Tracks. "Dead in a few minutes if we don't circle around towards the portal? Come on!" Then he turned to see what had caught Tailgate's attention and coughed, surprise caught in his throat.

Standing on the conveyor were five new Sharkticons and more were being cranked out. Their appearance was definitely Sharkticon but the scanning of Tailgate had left a large impression. If you took away the spikes and teeth, they could pass for bootleg repaints of the little Autobot. "Oh dear," groaned Tracks, "you've been cloned."

"It's fantastic," Tailgate said, admiring the robots that stared back at him with dumb eyes.

"It's great," Tracks said with a sneer. "It's great that they're not attacking. But my gas is clearing and I've only got another shot or so left. Run!"

Tailgate saw the black dissipating and faced his semi-clones, now numbering ten. "Wait, Tracks. Maybe they'll help us."

"Eh? Let's go!" yelled Tracks, shooting a blast from his gun that

wheezed out. He started to run.

Tailgate ignored him and looked into the optics of his legion. "You look at me like you're awaiting instruction. Will you take commands, I wonder? And do we share more than looks?"

He pointed towards the confused Sharkticon army, visible only in jumbled murk. "They're hurting machines; butchering them. My friend and I need help stopping the Quintessons and incapacitating their evil conveyor. Will you help us?"

The Tailgaticons stayed silent, but sensed their leader and nodded.

"Perfect," Tailgate said with a smile. "Now, go!" Snapping to action, the new creatures rushed forth, kicking aside Sharkticons. "They listen to me," said Tailgate. "How odd. Well, I'm getting out of here!" He darted away and crashed into Tracks, who was compelled, to his annoyance, to wait for Tailgate.

"Tracks, did you see that?!"

"Yes," stated Tracks, "and I've never been more terrified. But they're turning the tide. Let's activate the portal."

Tailgate agreed, but then remembered the cars. "Wait, we haven't destroyed the scanning booth!" As he said it, the gas cleared to reveal his clones throwing their bodies at the booth and ripping it apart with their sharp mouths. Another group shredded the conveyor's main computer, shutting it down. While production of their number had ceased, the good fifty or so were giving the Sharkticons a steady whipping.

"Madness!" growled the Quintesson as he got a look at the onslaught. While he still could, the Quintesson hovered behind a Porsche and watched the action from behind the car.

"They're winning!" laughed Tailgate. He thought about joining the fray, but the clones were doing quite well by themselves. "So much for calling in the other Autobots."

"It seems so." Tracks tapped his foot. They were currently out of danger and he was actually enjoying his view of the battle. He suddenly felt a faint gnawing on his leg and looked to see a rogue Sharkticon clawing his paint. "Hey, scat!" He punted the beast, which landed in a struggling mass of defeated Sharkticons.

The Sharkticons still standing, about eleven in number, realized their predicament and fled. Chipped Teeth, who was cowering with the Quintesson, ran off to join them. "Hey, get back!" snapped the Quintesson, but was ignored.

The Autobots smirked at the victory and joined the circle of Tailgaticons, who were raising their fists at the fleeing creatures. Tailgate thanked them.

Tracks, growing impatient, patted Tailgate's back. "Well, how nice, the universe is saved. Let's find the Quintesson and leave."

"No!" Tailgate refused. "We now have the reinforcements we need." He

turned to the deformed clones, who were eyeing him with worship. Tailgate had a foming mad-dog look in his eyes that Tracks did not care for. "Men, we must now free the surviving cars. Those passed on have given their lives so that you may live. Use that gift wisely. Stand for freedom wherever you go!"

Tracks slumped, hiding his face with his hand.

"Now," continued Tailgate. "You must turn on the portal and return the cars to their natural habitats. Liberate!" There was a cheer and the minions raced forth, pushing forward the first cars they found. They weren't quite sure where to push them, however, and slammed into each other's autos like bumper cars.

"No, no," Tailgate ordered, groaning. "Take them through the portal." He jogged forward and found the portal controls. It opened up to the last parking lot and he waved the clones through.

Tracks, meanwhile, caught a glance of the Quintesson hiding behind the Porsche. "There's the beaten cur," he whispered. Pretending not to notice, he strolled over to the defeated Sharkticons, who were staring at their feet and licking their wounds. Though he'd never admit it, Tracks was feeling jealous of Tailgate's newfound admiration.

Tracks put hands on hips and sneered at the Sharkticons. "I'm your new master, now!" The impressionable beasts looked at him with fear. "And my first edict is..." He spun around and pointed. "Imprison that Quint!" The Sharkticons, happy to have a new goal in life, rushed after their old master.

"Wretched peons!" grumbled the Quintesson as he struggled from his hiding place and sped forward, the Sharkticons close behind. "To the escape pod..."

Tracks cackled and cracked his knuckles. "Another invasion quelled." For the first time since arriving in the warehouse he noticed a window, outside of which an orbited planet was visible.

Soon after, the stolen cars were scattered arbitrarily around the parking lot. Tracks walked out of the portal and up to Tailgate, who was asking a clone to treat the cars more gently. "You truly have novel ways of completing missions."

Tailgate stood back and surveyed the clones. "They're not very bright. But I think they picked up the importance of independence." He called the clan together.

"Your work is done," announced Tailgate, gesturing grandly. "Go forth, through the portal, and become fighters for freedom, true champions of the weak and helpless. And if you ever feel like settling down, please be kind to your household appliances. Goodnight!"

The unsightly grouped snarled in unison and marched through the portal.

Tracks raised an eyebrow as the portal sealed. "I do hope they stay out of trouble."

***** Optimus Prime rubbed his forehead and continued debriefing Tracks and Tailgate. "So, by your estimation, the mission was successful?"

Tracks paused from admiring the new paint-job and dent removal Hoist had administered. "Oh, yeah. We single-handedly stopped a Quintesson invasion and got back a good number of stolen cars. Quite successful!"

Optimus sighed. "The cars were greatly damaged. And you didn't single-handedly stop the invasion. What exactly happened to the clones?"

"Well," Tracks mumbled, "we let them take the Quintesson ship."

"I see," Optimus stated. "I want you to view something." He lifted a remote control and activated a monitor. "Tell me what you think of this news report Blaster recorded."

The Autobots turned to the oval monitor. Pictured was a group of cars haphazardly parked fifty feet from the empty lot in which they belonged.

An anchor-woman narrated. "The proprietor of Jeremy's Used Cars arrived at work this morning to find all of his cars removed from the lot and placed outside the gates. While he assumes it was due to a college hazing ritual, one witness reported a group of giant robots, heh, pushing the cars from the lot. Whatever the truth may be, helicopter police discovered the word 'Liberation' scrawled in paint across the parking lot floor..."

Optimus turned off the monitor. "Tailgate, care to explain?"

Tailgate sank back in his chair, possessed by a satisfied grin. "I have disciples. It's about time someone joined the good fight."

Optimus cupped his chin in a hand and stared helplessly at the ceiling. Until his recent reanimation, he had been deceased for some time and the handling of the newer Autobots was left to another leader during his absence. Looking at Tailgate, he couldn't help but wonder. How would Rodimus have handled this?!

End
file.